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‘We Don’t Need Just *The DFC*, We Need Lots of Comics. And What’s More, We Can Make Them. Let’s Get to It!’

David Fickling, *The DFC* and the DFC Library

Mel Gibson

Comics have too often been dismissed as unsophisticated, popular culture texts or as a phase of reading which children are encouraged to move out of towards more ‘worthy’ literary fare. Mel Gibson, in exploring the recent comics-book initiative by David Fickling, *The DFC*, defends the attraction and value of comics culture and the complexity of its multimodal narratives.

WHEN adults in Ireland and Britain think about comics for children, they typically draw on a rich set of memories of a large number of titles, covering a range of genres from humour to action. In some cases those remembered titles were divided into niche markets according to age and gender, which meant that one would look to what slightly older readers than oneself were reading with longing, whilst others were seen as having an appeal to both

boys and girls and across age ranges. Narratives were often ongoing and the sense of anticipation, the urge to find out what happened next, was a

“Comic storytelling, words and pictures together, should be a natural right for all our children”



significant motivation to keep reading, something further increased by having to wait for the next edition. These were publications young readers owned as well, and often titles they chose themselves, generating an intense affection and loyalty. Another component of the power of comics was that this was

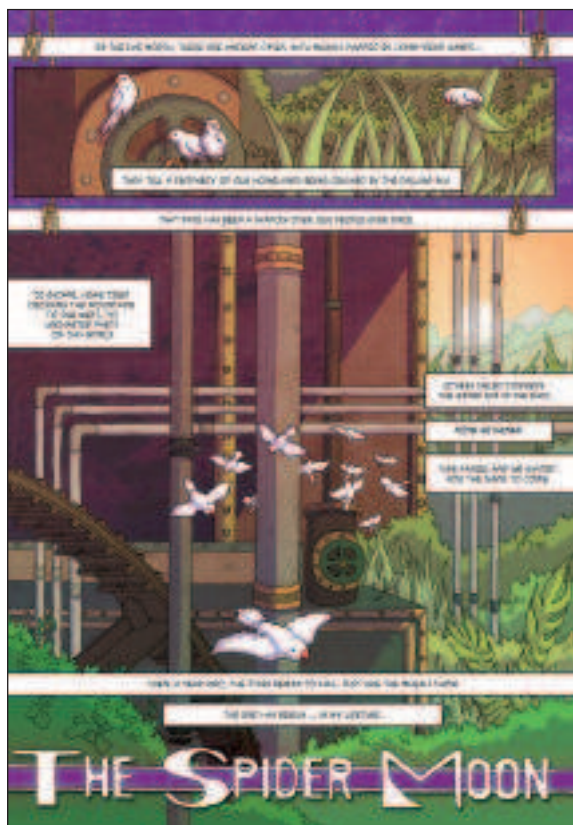
material that was disapproved of by some adults and professions (indeed, some children were not allowed comics). This disapproval helped make them a valued part of children’s culture and also made the medium a significant source of reading for pleasure across a number of generations of readers.



a number of generations of readers.

Yet, in the 1990s and onwards, were one to look for periodicals for children, while there might be a section in a shop that looked like it offered similar material, if one were to look closer one would discover that the vast majority were actually magazines focused on a specific franchise, or set of products, so functioning as advertising. In addition, one would find that they generally contained very few comic strips or other narratives (and even fewer ongoing ones). The slow disappearance of the children's weekly comic market, to be

car journey (an occasional purchase), or as an educational tool (thus tied to 'test' culture, rather than 'reading' culture). The lack of comic books for children



It was partly as a response to this contemporary paucity of weekly publications for children that David Fickling embarked on creating *The DFC*, an anthology comic, in 2008. Kate Brown, creator of *The Spider Moon*, one of the first DFC Library titles, says of the original comic, 'I had immense faith in *The DFC*, and I still do. I would have sworn my hands off to get something like that when I was a kid! My understanding was that it was to be like a children's TV channel ... a variety of things that were either stand-alone strips or things that a child could follow episode-by-episode over the months. It was to be pure storytelling, serious quality goodness. It sounded wonderful to me!'

It was, as this suggests, a title created primarily from a love of the medium of comics and an urge to foster a similar love amongst others. It drew together a terrific group of creators engaged with the medium. David is a passionate advocate for comics, arguing that:

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replaced by magazines, is partly due to the fact that publishing periodicals which focus on products is cheaper than developing and supporting those creating ongoing narratives.

Further, far from being marketed to children and adults (a challenging balancing act that comic publishers took on board), the primary target for most recent children's periodical publishing is clearly adults, framing periodical publishing either as a way of entertaining the bored child on a

removes one way in which the child can have a powerful sense of ownership. It also removes the motivation to read from the joy of engaging with an engrossing serial narrative. In cultures where there were once over fifty titles for girls, the most popular of which circulated 800,000 to 1 million per week, never mind those published for boys or those that appealed to all, this could be seen as a crime against reading for pleasure and as short-changing children.

David Fickling Books is a story house first and foremost. That is what drives us. It is not devoted to the book *per se*, it is devoted to the story, and narrative excellence in all its forms. Comic storytelling, words and pictures together, is a tradition as old as writing itself. This combination of words and pictures should be a natural right for all our children. We threw away our hugely successful comic industry in the UK, not because children don't like comics but for very short-sighted commercial reasons. With *The DFC* we weren't trying to restore the old comics. It wasn't a nostalgia trip. We realised that the UK and Ireland are the odd ones out in world culture, in that we are

amongst the few cultures without a proper comic culture for our children and I believe it is enormously to their detriment. *The DFC* was just a brand new comic to say we have some of the most talented comic storytellers in the world.

The DFC drew on and developed the growing number of creators who wanted to make comics and graphic novels which appeal to all readers, but particularly younger ones. During the 1980s and onwards the graphic novel, typically created for adult or older teenage readers, grew to become a significant aspect of the medium as published in English. Here

narratives could unfold over one, or more, volumes, some being originally envisaged as a single story arc, whilst others drew together what had been monthly editions of a comic into a bound volume. Like the prose novel, the graphic novel covers a huge range of themes and genres. However, whilst that market is now well

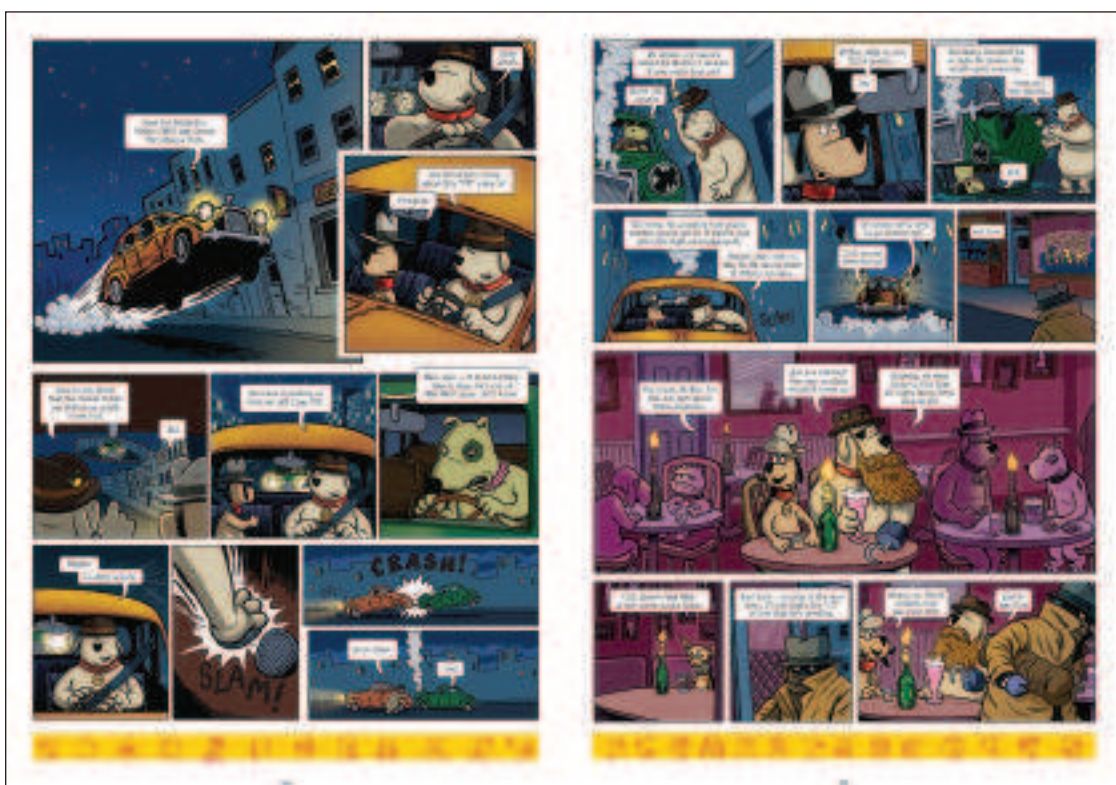
established, the focus on material for older readers has sometimes meant that material for younger readers has been given less emphasis. Combined with the disappearance of weekly comics for children, this has created a situation where, as

Adam Brockbank, one of the creators of *MeZolith*, states 'we are in danger of having a generation of children who are unfamiliar with the language of comics'. This is significant in that,

“Comics offer an effective way of developing the ability to read both words and pictures, as well as the grammar of the comic itself”

itself (through page layout and the use of speech balloons, for instance). In essence, comics offer both the joy of reading for pleasure and a thorough understanding of how complex texts drawing on a range of literacies work and are so important for several reasons.

David Fickling, in developing the DFC Library, the first three volumes of which have just been published (with another three due in autumn 2010 which have a slightly younger 'feel'), is, then, drawing on wider European models of comic and graphic novel publishing and marketing in gathering together the stories first published in the weekly



in a world where competency in multiple literacies is considered important and people need to be skilled readers of images and texts that combine in a range of ways, comics offer an effective way of developing the ability to read both words and pictures, as well as the grammar of the comic

comic into albums formatted like those of *Asterix*. This aspect of the overall DFC project is going well, with very positive responses to the books, suggesting that the changing perceptions of graphic novels may have created a new understanding of the value and potential of the medium. As Dave

Shelton, creator of DFC Library title *Good Dog, Bad Dog*, argues: 'With the medium enjoying greater acceptance among adults now, it only makes sense to cater for the younger generation too.'

The first three volumes offer a clear picture of the intended diversity of the DFC Library. *Good Dog, Bad Dog* contains three stories, the first setting the scene regarding the establishing of the partnership of Detectives McBoo and Bergman, the latter focusing on two of their cases 'The Golden Bone of Alexandria' (with Faz Choudhury colouring) and 'The Dogs' Dinner'. The range of references here goes far beyond comics, including, as Dave says, 'Laurel and Hardy, noir films and Billy Wilder'. This combination of detective thriller and gag strip with anthropomorphic characters is very funny and also builds in a range of references for the reader to discover at their leisure. As Dave says:

The references to things like Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks* in the stories aren't just for adult readers, they're also for the future selves of young readers. There were a lot of references in things in my own childhood comic-reading, in strips like *Judge Dredd*, that passed me by at the time but that I eventually twigged to in later life. So it's not just for the parent now, it's for the 8-year-old in five or ten years' time, discovering Hopper for the first time and having a dim recollection of where he's seen something like it before.

Thus, like all good writing, it offers space for the reader to grow and rewards rereading.

The second of the titles is *The Spider Moon* by Kate Brown, which is a beautiful fantasy adventure in one long story arc

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that will unfold over several volumes. Kate says 'when I was drafting *The Spider Moon*, I wanted to try and make sure it worked as a weekly chapter-based piece, and would also work as a piece to be read in one go'. She goes on to add:

Basically, when it was suggested that I try making an adventure story, and I had to try and think of a way of doing it, I thought back to the things that I loved when I was a kid. Television was my main source of inspiration as I wanted to recreate an atmosphere similar to *Mysterious Cities of Gold*, *Belle & Sebastian*, *Ulysses 31* and *Willy Foggy*. They were a massive part of why I began to love storytelling and so, in a way, *The Spider Moon* was an homage and my way of saying thank you to the things that inspired me as a child.

Kate's explanation of her method when working is

“Everyone who loves comics wants to see them returned to a significant place in our children's culture”

specifically to support others into making their own work and she includes a short piece on creating the cover, thus offering the reader an insight into the way she works.

The final book is by Ben Haggarty and Adam Brockbank. *MeZolith* can be briefly, if inadequately, summarised as Stone-Age horror. Here, the overarching narrative featuring the young hero, Poika, incorporates a number of elements including some of the myths of his tribe, the Kansa, who live on the western shores of the North Sea Basin. These myths are significant, for, as Ben says: 'I am by practice an oral storyteller but my passion is content driven. First and foremost I love traditional narratives – folktales, fairy tales, epics and myths – and am happy to try to tell them well – or help others to tell them well – in any medium.' Whilst the other two books are by author-illustrators, this is the work of two people. Adam, the artist, in talking about working with Ben says that 'there is a lot of back and forth, it's very collaborative, and these meetings are one of the most enjoyable parts of the process.' The art Adam creates, which provides a terrific sense of place to the book, 'takes a naturalistic direction. The palate is very naturalistic, which is rare in comic books. Although it is painterly, I wanted to maintain a graphic quality, so as not to lose clarity'. Summarising the book, Ben says that '*MeZolith* is intentionally operating on many levels – as historical fiction, as a study of questions around male childhood and adulthood, as a literary study of the archaeology of the imagination and the history



Given this, David argues that there is another way of seeing comics, that is, as inspiring and generating new stories and art. He says 'comic workshops are hugely popular, especially if there is a storytelling artist actually present. Kate went into a secondary school the other day and wowed them. They'd never seen anything like her work and she made them

of traditional motifs and as a political reminder that we were all tribal peoples once'.

Whilst the DFC Library will continue to grow, *The DFC* does not currently exist as a weekly title, having been closed after 43 issues; a casualty of the economic crisis. David says: 'We still get letters and messages from children who loved it over a year after it closed. At the Comic Expo recently a little girl, Agnes, came rushing up to buy all the issues she had missed. Agnes was keeping all her precious copies of *The DFC* safely in cellophane and she told me she and her friend cried when it closed. She was also keen to offer her help to bring the comic back again.'

However, this closure does not mean that *The DFC* is unavailable. The 43 comics can be bought as sets and are proving very popular, for instance, in schools, where a new comic can be 'released' on a weekly basis, thus

offering that sense of anticipation that develops passionate readers. There are hopes to revive the weekly comic, having learnt the lessons around marketing and the subscription model that the first run of the title offered. As David states:

If we see *The DFC* as a little ship, it has just put back into port for a refit but will set sail in a year or so more seaworthy, and more exciting and happily, with many of the same crew. After the joy it brought to readers, probably the most exciting thing that *The DFC* did was to bring UK comic drawing and writing talent together. The artists and authors have been so enthusiastic and involved and have certainly been an inspiration to me.

The enthusiasm of all involved, both readers and makers, has also been revealed in the amount of fan art and writing it generated, along with Manga, which has similarly inspired fans to become creators.

feel as if they too could join in'.

The passion and enthusiasm to create new stories in the medium for younger readers and inspire new creators is also visible in many other places, making this an ideal time to create a genuinely diverse collection for younger readers in libraries and elsewhere. The DFC Library should form a key element in these collections. As David says, everyone who loves comics wants to see them returned to a significant place in our children's culture and wants to see them excite young readers as well as older ones.

For more information on the DFC
Library, go to

Mel Gibson is based at Northumbria University where she lectures in childhood studies. Her extensive research and publications have focused predominantly on comics and their audiences. Her website on comic studies is at <http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/>